

Short communications

Observation of African Stonechat *Saxicola torquata albofasciata* in Mgahinga National Park, south-western Uganda

During a two-week bird-watching trip to south-western Uganda, we took the photo below of an African Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* along the northern border of Mgahinga National Park (01°21'S, 29°36'E) on 5 September 2006. In the field we were not immediately aware of the different plumage of the bird, compared to the plumages of other African Stonechats we had previously observed during the trip. From Kibale Forest south to Mgahinga birds were identified as belonging to the subspecies *axillaris* in having a very restricted rufous patch on the breast, with lower breast, sides of the breast, flanks and belly all pure white (Stevenson & Fanshawe 2004, Urquhart 2002).

Whilst looking at the pictures more closely later, we realised that the bird from Mgahinga was different: chin, throat and breast are predominantly black (Figure 1, please contact RF or Editor for colour pictures). Some chestnut feathers on the breast, the black mottled flanks and the uneven demarcation of the black breast indicate that it concerns a first year male of the subspecies *albofasciata* (Urquhart 2002). On seeing the photos Mr. E. Urquhart indeed supported this opinion (pers. comm.). Other plumage characteristics discernable from our photos were a yellowish base of the lower mandible, the rather glossy black plumage and some white on the outer tail feathers.



Figure 1. African Stonechat *Saxicola torquata albofasciata* photographed in Mgahinga National Park, 5 September 2006 (R. Felix).

Saxicola torquata albofasciata occurs in the western and south-eastern highlands of Ethiopia, at higher elevations in the Rift Valley, in southeast Sudan and in extreme northeast Uganda. It is a montane species occurring mostly at 2440-3050 m a.s.l. Subspecies *axillaris* occurs in large parts of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, DRC,

central-west Kenya and northern Tanzania (Urquhart 2002, Stevenson & Fanshawe 2004, Del Hoyo *et al.* 2005).

The bird we photographed was in a pair. Both birds were alarming fanatically when approached, with the male also wing-flicking. However, we did not see fledged juveniles or any other behaviour that would have indicated presence of a nest. The habitat in the area consisted of typical open scrub with isolated trees and bushes. Considering the fact that the birds were paired and behaved territorially, we guess that this was a pair of possibly locally breeding birds rather than post-breeding migrants from elsewhere. If so, this would imply an expansion of the known range of the subspecies *albofasciata*. Likewise, this subspecies was also recently recorded outside its known range in Kenya and Tanzania (E. Urquhart, B. Finch, pers. comm.).

However, the taxonomic status of *axillaris* and *albofasciata* remains far from clear. Some authors suggest a firm link between the two, because of a high amount of variation in the extent of black on the breast in *axillaris* (Urquhart 2002). There are specimens of *axillaris* from Kenya in the British Museum of Natural History that show virtually no chestnut on the breast which is entirely black. The question therefore arises whether these are incorrectly labelled and should be classified as specimens of the *albofasciata* race instead (E. Urquhart, pers. comm.).

Additional observations of breeding behaviour and detailed descriptions of plumage characteristics of Stonechats in eastern Africa are required to establish more precisely the distribution patterns of the two subspecies, and recent changes, if any. Besides, since local studies on Stonechats are still rare, anecdotal data from visiting birdwatchers may well contribute to clarify the situation. Worldbirds™ (a joint initiative by BirdLife International, the RSPB and Audubon), which collates (anecdotal) data collected from birders around the world can be useful for this purpose.

References

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- Urquhart, E. 2002. *Stonechats. A Guide to the Genus Saxicola*. Christopher Helm, London.

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